The Dynamics of Gender Politics in the Hostels of Cape Town: Another Legacy of the South African Migrant Labour System

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The Dynamics of Gender Politics in the Hostels of Cape Town: Another Legacy of the South African Migrant Labour System*

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Abstract

The overcrowded, poorly equipped African male hostels of Cape Town house many women and children too. Personal relations in these migrant hostels illustrate how gender politics are shaped by racial exploitation, poetry and the manipulation of 'tradition' to legitimate male control. Tables set out the location, employment, education and age of bed-holders and their dependants in the research sample. Married women from the countryside seeking increased financial support from their husbands may use family sickness to remind men of their responsibilities. Wives in the hostels are forced into dependent submissiveness in order to continue staying there. Unmarried women are even more insecure as they compete with one another and with wives for access, via male bed-holders, to accommodation essential to survival. Some mutual female support does occur but far greater male solidarity is evident, with older men retaining 'traditional' authority. The paper concludes by suggesting that the power of (remoulded) tradition is such that it constitutes an important fourth factor, together with race, class and gender, shaping social relations.

. . . no man is powerless. However exploited, however stupid, however brutal, however deceived, all men are potent in the realm of reproduction. [1]

Introduction

The overall structure and system of migratory labour in South Africa has been well documented.[2] There is, however, no study that has examined the complexities of gender politics in the hostels where many African men and women have been living for most of their working lives.

This paper examines the dynamics of gender politics as played out in the challenging environment of supposedly single-sex hostels in the Western Cape. In particular, it focuses on how this dynamic is shaped by the exploitative system of racial discrimination, economic deprivation and the manipulation of 'tradition' as a resource for the social control of women by men. 'Tradition' here denotes a reconstruction of the past as representing a reality that is unchallengeable and used to legitimate the perpetuation of certain behavioural patterns favourable to men.

There are several reasons why gender was selected as a focus of study in the hostels. Firstly, women have been defined out of the whole migrant labour system, both in terms of access to jobs and in terms of most analyses of this system, which deal largely with women as dependents of male migrants. Secondly, hostels as central pillars of this system are by definition a male domain, which women enter on male terms. Thirdly, the constraints of space and lack of privacy in these hostels limit the possibilities of male-female negotiation and highlight the negative impact of external influences on women's relationships with men.

Feminism presents some helpful theoretical ideas about the broader dynamics of gender politics, which will be brought to bear on the analysis in this paper. However, it is also important to focus on the particularity of personal relationships between ordinary men and women in various social situations, within the context of wider issues.

The problems faced by ordinary people cannot be seen in isolation. Oppression has to be seen as a totality that impinges on the lives of people. In addition, the very existence of a complex of forces in the form of race, class and gender calls for a more holistic approach to effective analysis of the processes at work and the strategies utilised by people both as individuals and groups to deal with oppressive conditions. As a recent analysis of facism and sexism concludes: 'Oppression is multi-dimensional, because its operation in the one domain is easily transferable to another. . . One form of domination serves as a paradigm for another.[3]

The South African socio-political situation has an impact on working class black men in a way that brings out the worst aspects of chauvinism in them. Black women present the only cushion against their complete powerlessness, and any suggestion of equality between the sexes is a real threat to their egos. The oppression they suffer in the wider society serves as a paradigm for their domination of women. This is reinforced by an appeal to 'tradition' to legitimate practices which are said to be 'central to African culture'.

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[2] See, for example, F. Wilson, *Migrant labour in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1972); A.D. Spiegel, 'Migrant labour remittances: Rural Differentiation and the Developmental Cycle in a Lesotho Community', MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1979; C. Murray, *Families Divided* (Johannesburg, 1981).

[3] A .Brittan and M. Maynard, *Sexism, Racism and Oppression* (Oxford, 1984), p. 217.

The family (used here in its wider sense) is still a major sphere in which the domination of men is secured at the expense of women. Each family is a site for individual men to oppress women in their own particular way: 'It is at this juncture that men begin to perceive women as subject to their power, and consequently as being their property, their possessions, their objects. [4]

The data presented in this paper were collected over a period of two years as part of a research project undertaken in consultation with and in response to a request by the Western Cape Hostel Dwellers' Association (HDA). A participatory research approach was adopted as part of strategy to strengthen the efforts of hostel dwellers to fight for the right to live dignifed lives as workers in the Western Cape. A central demand of the HDA. is encapsulated in their motto: 'Unite Families'. Given the legal and other structural constraints on female migration and urbanisation, it was deemed imperative to examine the conditions under which women have come to live in these hostels as well as the dynamics of resultant gender relationships.

The research involved selected in-depth interviews with twenty-eight residents, thirteen females and fifteen males. It also included observation of the physical conditions of the hostels and administering 699 questionnaires to bed holders (all but seven of whom were male) living in the council-built hostels in Nyanga, Guguletu and Langa, townships in the Cape Town area (see Table 1 for the geographical distribution of the sample). At the end of 1986, I spent twelve weeks in the Langa New Flats environment. In addition to being a member of the Upgrading Board of Trustees of HDA I participated in six one-day leadership training workshops and attended regular executive meetings of the HDA.

For collection and analysis of statistical data in this research project, the basic unit of study is the individual bed in a hostel. The 'bed-holder is thus the equivalent of a 'house-holder' in a more conventional setting. This immediately introduces the politics of space, where people are limited to a bed as the only space over which they have some measure of control. This space limitation creates an intense environment for human interaction, which highlights dynamics which are ordinarily hidden from public scrutiny.

Table 1—*Number of beds studied compared with total*

Geographic area	Blocktype	Total Beds	Sample Beds	Sample Beds [%]
Nyanga		2744	38	1
Guguletu		2752	151	5
Langa	Zones	3184	174	5
Langa	New Flats	1984	109	5
Langa	Old Flats	1800	163	9
Langa	Special Quarters	364	64	18
Total		12828	699	5

[4] *ibid.*, p. 220.

Most of the research data relates to council-built hostels in Langa because of a decision to concentrate in one area rather than spread limited resources too thinly. Langa has the largest hostel population and thus presents a wide base from which to gather data. There are also many similarities between the different areas in terms of both the physical environment and the structures of human interaction. Council-built hostels were targeted for study because of relative ease of access, compared with employer-controlled hostels where access and research are more difficult.

The setting

The hostels of the Western Cape are the logical outcome of a deliberate policy, pursued by succesive white South African governments, to discourage urbanisation of Africans in the Western Cape in particular, and to reserve the area mainly for use by whites and 'coloureds'.[5] Africans were only allowed to reside there on a temporary basis in single-sex hostels. The outcome is extreme overcrowding (see Table 2) and gross inadequacy of basic amenities in accommodation designed as 'single men's' quarters.[6]

Table 2—*Estimated council-built hostel population and average bed occupancy*

Geographic Area	Estimated*[1] Total Population	Average*[2] Bed Occupancy
Nyanga	11196	4,0
Guguletu	7540	2,7
Langa	17426	2,3
Total	36162	2,8

*[1] Estimated Population = Average bed occupancy × Total beds.
*[2] This is the average bed occupancy of the 699 beds studied in this project.

Access to accommodation in the hostels is through relationships with bed-holders (a mere 35 per cent of residents), who are placed in an enormously powerful position through controlling such a scarce resource. This control also extends to the system of maintaining discipline, which is the preserve of elderly males and aims to limit tensions and promote cordial relations between residents of the hostels. This system revolves around electing one resident in a 'door'[7] (see Fig 1) to act as convenor, arbitrator and chairman of disciplinary hearings, which are called whenever a resident lodges a complaint. Such convenors are called *izibonda* (singular,

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[5] M.E. West, 'From Pass Courts to Deportation: Changing of Influx Contol in Cape Town', *African Affairs*, 81, 325 (1982), M. Savage, 'Pass Laws and the Disorganisation and Reorganisation of the African Population', Carnegie Conference Paper No. 281, Cape Town, 1984.
[6] Average bed occupancy is 2.8. In the Langa hostels the ratio of people to working toilets is 133:1 and persons to taps is 117:1.
[7] A 'door' refers to a group of rooms sharing a single external door.

isibonda).[8] They are recognised by the local township authorities, whose cooperation they rely on to force disciplinary evictions from the hostels.[9]
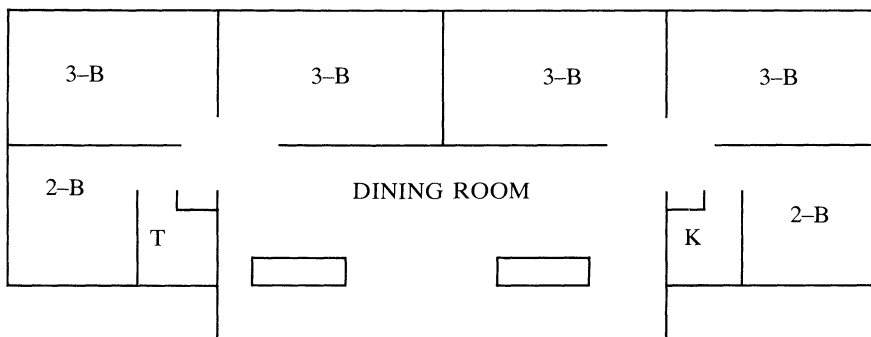
B = Bed   SCALE: 1 cm = 1m (approx)
K = Kitchen
T = Toilet

Source—E. Thomas, 'Conflicts and their resolution in Guguletu migrant hostels: A Study of the Role of the Western Cape Hostel Dwellers Association, unpublished Honours. Thesis. University of Cape Town. (1987), p. 34.

Figure 1—A hostel 'door'

Most of the men living in the hostels come from the Eastern Cape ('Transkei' and 'Ciskei') and are employed in low-paying labourers' jobs. The majority of the bed-holders (78 per cent), are in formal employment and have an average weekly income of R100. (see Table 3)

Table 3—*Employment Profile of the Bedholders*

Employment Category*[1]	Number of Bedholders	% of Bedholders	Average weekly Income (Rands)
FE	547	78	100
SE	33	5	62
UWS	61	9	0
UNS	8	1	0
P	37	5	28
G	8	1	
No record	5	1	
Total	699	100	

*[1] FE = Formal Employment; SE = Self Employed/informal cash earning activities; UWS = Unemployed and Seeking Work; UNS = Unemployed and Not Seeking Work; P = Pension; G = Grant.

[8] Their role is similar to that of men in rural areas who were often used by the white government authorities to control local villages. See W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Command and Consensus* (Cape Town, 1975), p. 80.

[9] E. Thomas, 'Conflicts and their Resolution in Guguletu Migrant Hostels: A Study of the Role of the Western Hostel Dwellers Association', B.A. Hons. thesis, Univ. of Cape Town, 1987.

In contrast to the relatively high employment rate of the bedholders only 26 per cent (161 out of 630 people) of the adult (older than 17 years) dependants have any income. Also, the average weekly income is much lower (R57) than that of the bedholders with the female dependants earning less than the male dependants and suffering a higher rate of unemployment. Women in formal employment also earn considerably less than similarly employed males (see Table 4).

Table 4—*Employment Profile of the Dependants*

MALES

Employment Category*[1]	Number	[%]	Average weekly Income (Rands)*[2]
FE	94	47	76
SE	3	1	25
UWS	52	26	0
UNS	8	4	0
ZI	44	22	0
Total	201	100	75

FEMALES

Employment Category*[1]	Number	[%]	Average weekly Income (Rands)*[2]
FE	82	19	40
SE	46	11	53
UWS	61	14	0
UNS	84	43	0
ZI	56	13	0
Total	429	100	47

*[1] FE = Formal Employment; SE = Self Employed/informal cash earning activities; UWS = Unemployed and Seeking Work; UNS = Unemployed and Not Seeking Work; ZI = Zero income: employment category not recorded.
*[2] The average income of all dependants with a non-zero income is R57 per week.

Table 5—*Education profile of the adult (> 17 years) council-built hostel population*

Education	Bedholders		Dependants		Total [%]	
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Nil	106	0	14	29	149	11
Sub A-Std 3	161	1	43	76	281	21
Std 4-Std 6	279	3	73	193	548	41
Std 7-Std 9	50	3	30	98	181	14
Matric	6	0	12	16	34	2.5
post matric*[1]	1	0	0	0	1	0.07
Not recorded	89	0	28	17	134	10
Total	692	7	200	429	1328*[2]	
[%]	52	0.5	15	32		

*[1] Teachers Training
*[2] sex not recorded for 2 dependants

The employment profiles and the low educational qualifications (see Table 5) reflect the hostel dwellers' disadvantaged position as migrant workers desperate to get employment. Although some people eventually move into better jobs after an initial 'entry' placement, job mobility is on the whole very limited.

The proportion of males to females overall is approximately 2:1 and the majority of women are dependent on the bedholder for cash income (see average income for women in Table 4) and accommodation. This also includes the seven female bedholders in the sample who inherited their rights to the bed from a male, either through widowhood or former owners moving permanently to the rural areas. Female bed-holders are much the same age as female dependants and have been in Cape Town only a couple of years longer, whereas male bed-holders (average age 48 years) are strikingly older than female dependants as well as bed-holders and have been more than twice as long in town (26 years).

Table 6—*Demographic profile of adult hostel dwellers*

	Males	Ave Age	Ave Stay*[3]	Females	Ave Age	Ave Stay*[3]
BEDHOLDER	692	48	26	7	39	12
DEPENDANTS						
Wife				223	40	10
Girlfriend				74	41	10
Sibling	22			21		
Child	53	26	4	58	26	5
Other rel*[2]	54	23	6	35	26	4
Not rel*[2]	23	28	5	14	27	2
No detail	48			4		
Total	892		+	436 = 1328*[1]		

*[1] Sex not recorded for 2 adult dependants
*[2] 'Other rel' includes all blood relatives and those by marriage who are neither sibling nor child of the bedholder eg. brother-in-law, parent.
*[2] 'Not rel' includes those not related to bedholder by blood or marriage eg. friends and relatives and children of girlfriends.
*[3] Average number of years in Cape Town since first contract in the case of contract workers or since first visit to Cape Town in the case of women.

By contrast, comparison of male and female dependants shows that the women (average age 37 years) are on the whole older than the men (27 years). They have also been in Cape Town for longer. While male dependants move on, therefore, women, particularly wives and girlfriends, do not have much opportunity to transcend a dependent status in the physically and materially impoverished hostel environment. The system, is not, however, completely closed for women. There are escape routes by which some women do free themselves from dependency rela-tionships. These hinge on two main factors: access to a cash income and possibilities of alternative accommodation. Even within the limitations of these hostels, women with independent income sources are able to resist total subordination. Accommo-dation options within the hostels are very limited, as evidenced by a total of only

seven women bedholders out of 699 (i.e 1 per cent, see Table 5). Options outside the hostels are limited by the appalling housing shortage.[10] A so-called site and service area is one of the few alternatives to hostel accommodation. However, alternative accommodation in a site and service area does not necessarily mean escape from the tentacles of patriarchical control.[11]

The dynamics of gender politics in the hostels

In this section we examine the interaction of men and women both as individuals and as groups. A distinction will be made between single and married women, because of the different ways in which men relate to them and also the different strategies they adopt to cope with male dominance. We also examine how women interact among themselves given their set gender roles; and, finally, how men interact with men in this setting. Specific case studies are used to show how some individuals deal with particular problems or conflicts, without attempting to present such cases as being generally representative of gender politics in the hostels, let alone in the wider society.

African women pass through the control of different men throughout their lifetime. It is a control that stretches from the cradle to the grave.[12] This system, which has been further reinforced by the legal provisions of successive white governments, confers the status of perpetual minor upon African women.[13]

The cornerstone of 'traditional' control of women by men among Africans in most parts of South Africa is the system of bride wealth, which is used to secure control of the reproductive power of women.[14] Bridewealth also plays an important role in ordering relations between men, both as individuals and as groups.[15] Murray rightly criticises static interpretations of 'traditional' practices, noting dynamic changes in bridewealth practices in line with different socio-economic demands.[16] Nevertheless, the symbolic transfer of patriarchical control over individual women remains an enduring idea. Effective control over women derives in part from an acceptance of this symbolism rather than from concrete 'jural' control.

[10] See, for example, C. Elias, 'A housing study: Legislation and the control and supply of urban African accommodation', Carnegie Conference Paper, No. 157, Cape Town, 1984; M. Kentridge, 'Housing in South Africa: from political privilege to basic right', Post Carnegie Conference Series, No. 14, Cape Town, 1986.

[11] See Josette Colle, *Crossroads. The Politics of Reform and Repression, 1976-86* (Johannesburg, 1987).

[12] The father's control operates up to the time of marriage, at which point it passes over to the husband. In the case of a child born to single woman, the woman's father and brothers assume control. A widow falls under the control of a designated brother-in-law who assumes the responsibilities of his late brother including in some cases, fathering children for him, M. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest* (London, 1961, 2nd ed). p. 210.

[13] H.J. Simons, *African Women. Their legal status in South Africa* (London 1968), p. 281.

[14] Murray, *Families Divided*, p. 119, writing of *bohali* the Sotho term for bridewealth — less familiar, perhaps, than the Nguni *Iobola*.

[15] Cattle in the 'traditional' setting were not just a symbol of wealth but an indication of the relative strength of individual men in the system of control. Thus their use as a unit of exchange in bridewealth transactions also symbolises the transfer of control over individual women from one patriarchical family structure to another. The bonds of kinship were strengthened in the process, Murray, *Families Divided*, p. 142.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 148.

Money has by and large replaced cattle as a unit of exchange for women.[17] However, the symbolic importance of cattle remains in the form of the ceremony of 'being made to eat *amaas*' (sour milk) which a young bride undergoes as a sign of acceptance into the new family. According to informants, this is still a widespread practice that takes place at any time from a few months to a few years after entry into the husband's family.

Another symbolic practice that is still said to be widespread is the barring of women from the 'cattle kraal' in deference to the departed, who used to be buried there. The 'kraal' is also an exclusive male area where meetings are held. In one hostel in Guguletu, women are barred from the common 'front' room during certain periods, on the grounds that it was *ebuhlanti* (the kraal'), which men used for meetings and discussions. Women are in some cases forced by this ruling to eat their meals in the overcrowded sleeping rooms, sometimes in the presence of tuberculosis sufferers coughing up blood.

The concept of marriage is a variable and changing one. In some cases it implies the full process of bridewealth, a wedding ceremony in front of a magistrate or priest, the women being taken to the man's home by her relatives, the final incorporation into the man's family. Variations of the above apply, but in some relationships people simply live together without going through any of the above procedures. Some of the relationships in the hostels can be seen as 'marriages' even if the man has another family in the rural setting.

It is also important to distinguish between the obligations of marriage for men and for women. A women marries into the man's family, whereas the man remains unattached to the woman's family, beyond the responsibilities of bridewealth and occasional economic contributions. The fact of marrying into a family is at the very basis of bringing the woman into a system of control that ensures the perpetuation of patriarchal family relations. She is given a new name to signify the family's expectations of her contribution.[18]

It is worth noting that it is women who are given the responsibility of socialising the newly-wed into her marital role. This sets the scene of control by the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law over this woman, with all the rights and privileges that go with the resultant power. The system is guaranteed perpetuation by the psychological and economic benefits that senior women derive from it. The level of intensity of this control differs from one household to another, depending on the degree of independence of the newly marrieds' own accommodation from that of the rest of the extended family and the nature of the mother/son relationship.

The psychological complexities of mother/son relationships are beyond the scope of this paper.[19] Two points which are relevant to the understanding of the relationship between the mother-in-law and their daughters-in-law will be made here. Firstly, the mother-in-law perceives her role as the king-maker in relation to her own son. She derives power out of successfully installing him on a throne as man,

[17] *ibid.*, p. 119.

[18] Examples are: Nosakele, the one who is to build a home for the extended family and Nonyameko, the patient one. There are also names to clip the wings to women known to be non-conformist, like Noknowledge, the one who knows too much and Nowise, the wise one.

[19] But see O'Brien, *Politics of Reproduction*.

husband and ultimately, father. Part of the purpose of socialising the newly married women into the workings of her adopted family is precisely that installation. Secondly, there is a real threat posed by the daughter-in-law to the economic benefits the mother was deriving out of being the likely sole recipient of remittances from her son.

According to informants, resolution of the second point determines the quality of the relationship between the two women, thus defining to a large extent whether the king-maker becomes an ally or a hostile competitor. The issue of remittances can be settled in one of three ways. Firstly, the mother-in-law continues to receive the money and gives her daughter-in-law what she feels is appropriate, which may or may not be adequate for the latter's needs. Secondly, the man may decide to split the remittances and send money to the two women separately, to minimise conflict. Finally, the man may send all the money to his wife and leave it up to her discretion to support his mother as best she can.

Male/female interaction:
Men and their wives

Most married women who live in the hostels oscillate between town and country, spending part of the year at the rural base and the other in town. They are torn between the responsibilities of maintaining the rural 'home', bringing up children and fulfilling wider family responsibilities on one hand, and servicing a personal relationship with their husbands on the other. In some cases married women are also driven by economic necessity to come to the city to demand support or seek income-generating opportunities, particularly if their husbands are unemployed or very poorly paid. There is rationality behind maintaining the rural 'home', given the lack of proper housing in urban areas and the undesirability of the hostels as a place in which to bring up children.

For those women coming from independent households, there is the serious logistical problems of the care of their school going children during their absence form 'home'. Neighbours, relatives and friends all play a part in helping out. Younger children tend to be taken along to town, hence the high percentage of them in the hostel population. Children, strikingly, comprise approximately one-third of the hostel population, an important fact which deserves more exploration elsewhere. In some cases desperate women even take school-going children with them, thus disrupting their education. Women living in extended family settings face different problems depending on the support they enjoy from their in-laws.

There are some marriage relationships that seem to be functioning well in spite of these constraints while others are highly unstable. The stability of a relationship appears to be a function of the stability of the man's job, his reliability in remitting part of his wages home, the level of communication with his wife and how well the couple has adjusted to periodic contact. Unstable relationships, on the other hand, are marked by the husbands failure to send remittances, either as a result of employment problems or a loss of a sense of responsibility for the family at 'home'. More often than not men also abuse alcohol and/or are involved in long-term extra-marital relationships in town. It becomes difficult in the end to distinguish between cause and effect.

Married women who come to the hostels thus either move into a warm, welcoming environment or a cold, indifferent and sometimes openly hostile setting where they are seen as intruders by their husbands. The first category of women is likely to visit regularly and stay for as long as they wish, within the limits outlined above. Women in the second category are likely to come only as a desperate measure to save their families from disintegration or starvation or both. Various strategies are employed by these women to legitimate their visits. The most common one is the adoption of the sick role[20] by either the woman herself or one of her young children, whom she then accompanies to Cape Town. In some cases the sick role is adopted by a grown-up child, who is then despatched to seek health care from the father.

Informants express the view that there is no way in which a man can escape the responsibility for the care of sick members of his family. His wife and children are an obligatory responsibility, with rituals and traditional healing ceremonies that simply cannot proceed without the man of the house.[21] In addition, the inequalities in the distribution of health resources between urban and rural areas[22] justfiy to move to Cape Town, in particular, for health reasons.

Dlamini used to send money regularly to his family in the Transkei after his arrival in Cape Town in the 1960s. This stopped after 1980, when he also stopped visiting during the December holiday period. When his teenage daughter [our informant] came to seek him out in 1984, she found him living with another woman, whom she blames for her family problems. This woman treats her well, but she hates and fears her and remains angry. She had come on this visit because she had developed *mafufunyane*[23] and her mother had sent her so that her father could take responsibility for her treatment. Her condition had improved significantly since her arrival in January 1986. She is also frustrated by her mothers inability to confront her father on this issue. She feels that her mother's lack of education and her feelings of inadequacy in relation to her father contribute to her unwillingness to deal with this problem. She insists that she will never marry, until she has a profession, so that she can be free from the type of dependency that she perceives her mother to be trapped in. Her mother has instead opted out, and now relies on her eldest son for financial support.

This approach to the problem of an unfaithful husband should be seen in the context of the available choices. The wife could theoretically sue the husband for maintenance, but common sense (supported by research findings) indicates that the costs of winning such a case far outweigh its uncertain benefits. In addition, compliance with court orders is very poor.[24] Another option is divorce. This would require her to go back to her natal home, which in turn would on the willingness and capacity of her

[20] Janzen has described how people use sickness as a resource to draw attention to other needs and to lay claim to communal resources that are the necessary support which enables the sick person to 'afford' to be ill, *The Quest for Therapy in lower Zaire* (Berkeley, 1978).

[21] Mayer's observations in East London suggest that there has not been much change in this respect, P. Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Cape Town, 1963), p. 277.

[22] C. de Beer, *The South African Disease: Apartheid, Health and Health Services* (Johannesburg, 1984).

[23] A temporary mental illness said to be brought about evil forces, see H. Ngubane, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine* (London, 1977), p. 144.

[24] The ability of the courts to enforce compliance is also questionable. See S.B. Burman and J. Barry, 'Divorce and Deprivation in South Africa', Carnegie Conference Paper, No. 87, Cape Town, 1984. This is in stark contrast to the experience of the women in Obbo's study in Kampala, who could rely on the courts of law to enforce their maintenance claim against the fathers of their children: C. Obbo, *African Women: Their struggle for economic independence* (Joahnnesburg, 1981), p. 102.

family to accept her back and successfully fight off the inevitable demands of her husbands family for the return of bridewealth.[25] Few women are fortunate enough to get such support from their families. They are likely to be told to persevere in their efforts to entice the man back into taking responsibility, because 'it is just not done to abandon one's married home,'[26] without being seen to have explored all possibilities for reconciliation. Confrontation with the husband is another option, but that requires more courage than some can muster. In any case it is a risky operation, because she could be thrown out of the hostel by the man and have to find her own way back home to the rural areas. Her decision to use her daughters illness as a way of reminding her husband of his responsibility is thus perfectly rational in her circumstances. The nature of her daughters illness is also ideally suited, because *mafufunyane* requires rituals as part of the healing process, and it is obligatory for the father of the affected child to participate.[27] Thus 'tradition' in this case is a useful tool for the woman.

Some women, however, choose confrontation. They take the risk and come to town to demand support. In some cases it pays off, but for others it is a struggle that only the very persistent win. One such woman comes regularly to get money from her husband, who abuses alcohol and remits money irregularly. She times her visits to coincide with bonus month, November, to secure his lump sum payment. She acknowledges that it is not easy and that she is sometimes assaulted in the process, but thinks that it is worth the effort in the end.

The dependence of women on male bed-holders for accommodation gives men enormous power over women, making the hostels truly a 'man's world.' This power manifests itself in various forms depending on the nature of the individual relationship, but it permeates every facet of life. For married women this means that they may only stay in the hostels for as long as the man allows them to do so. Pleasing ones husband is an essential survival mechanism for married women who want to prolong their stay or indeed be allowed to live there permanently. There is of course nothing wrong essentially with pleasing one's spouse, but it is the equating of female subordination with male pleasure which is problematic. Many women thus adopt a submissive role as a strategy to ensure their stay, expecially in those situations where they have come in desperation after a period of neglect and irregular remittances. An example of necessary submissiveness is in the perceived inability to question the wisdom of certain decision, however ill-advised, taken by men, because this might invite displeasure. For example, the open spaces of the hostels are cluttered with old cars in different states of disrepair which women refer to as the 'corpses of their men's toys'. There is both despair and amusement in the women's voices.

There seems to be a great need by these men to restore their self-image, which is under constant attack in their daily lives. There are similarities between these men and the migrant workers studied in Boston, USA. Men use their earnings on visible consumer items, such as cars, radios and television sets. The apparently senseless

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[25] This viewpoint is also similar to that of Mayer's informants in East London, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, p. 206.

[26] *ibid.*

[27] M. Bührmann, *Living in Two Worlds* (Cape Town and Pretoria, 1985).

acquisition of property is seen as an attempt to ease psychological deprivation in an oppressive class structure. Women and children are denied essential and nutritious food, so that their men can be nourished psychologically. This phenomenon is aptly labelled 'Sacrificial bargaining'. [28]

When challenged about their insistence on independent decision-making on matters of serious import, men point to the need to make swift decisions, which might be jeopardised by women's tendency to hesitate. [29] The demand for unquestioning obedience on the part of women, is recognised by both the educated and uneducated men in the Eastern Cape as central to the maintenance of patriarchal family relations. [30] As in the past, the co-option of senior women by the patriarchical family structure continues and ensures its perpetuation even today. These senior women are thus given a stake in the control of other women. [31]

There is, however, ingenuity in the apparent powerlessness of these women. They are much more likely to get what they want out of marriage if they are seen to possess the 'traditional' female virtues of modesty and deference. They are acutely aware of the fragility of their men's egos and the the need to make these men feel like 'masters in their own domains'. [32] A woman is likely to know why she is doing it, but she is ambivalent about allowing herself to play this docile role.

Another problem relates to faithfulness to one's spouse and the different expectations of males and females. For the majority of men, complete faithfulness on the part of their wives is non- negotiable, irrespective of their own behaviour. In spite of the availability of protection against unwanted pregnancy, many men use the risk of 'having children fathered by the open veld' as the main reason for disapproving of extramarital relationships for their wives but not for themselves. Some have gone as far as to prohibit their wives from using contraceptives as a device to control their sexual activities: 'one has to remove the licence to loose life, to avoid one's name being disgraced in the village during one's absence'. Some men disagree with this view, which they attribute to men's selfishness:

They know the limits of their own passions. Why should they not want to accept that women are also starved of sexual relations in the same way as men? Any woman who has known a man has to have a way of satisfying that need. I allow my wife to come here for visits as often as she likes. I don't want her to be tempted.

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[28] C. Burton, *Subordination, Feminism and Social Theory* (Australia, 1985), p. 50, citing Cobb's study.

[29] This fits the stereotype of females lacking in rational thinking capacities, which is used to justify their exclusion from decision-making processes, O'Brien, *Politics of Reproduction* p. 119.

[30] Only senior women who acted as heads of homesteads in the absence of men were accorded any measure of autonomy and participation in decison-making Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest* p. 41.

[31] See also Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, p. 234.

[32] This strategy is not unique to these women, of course. One of Obbo's informants, for example, referred to the same problem: 'What men want is a softly spoken woman, who can kneel at their feet while serving them. I have many pairs of stockings torn through kneeling. I do not know why I do it'. Obbo, *African Women*, p. 104.

It seems that women in this setting face enormous obstacles to the right to control their fertility, which is an issue of interest not only to feminists, but to all those interested in population growth patterns.[33]

The case material cited in this paper illustrates many of the issues raised by other writers.[34] The dingy hostels are turned into 'castles' by these men, who lord it over their women. It could be argued that the issues raised here are not peculiar to the hostels, but apply widely in the South African context. The focus of this analysis is not only on the peculiar but also on those everyday issues which assume great intensity an importance in a situation of deprivation. The separation of men and women by legal decree has distorted family relations by limiting the space for the development of mutal trust and respect.

It is ironically around the issue of reproduction[35] that the hostel environment presents some of the most interesting aspects of human interaction. One would have thought that, given the lack of privacy, the period in and around childbirth would be the most difficult for women in this environment, but all the women interviewed were unanimous in their preference for the hostels over their rural 'homes.' Although access to health facilities is an important factor in this preference, the support that women get from their husbands during this period is decisive.

In the village setting childbirth is a woman's affair, and ritual prohibitions ensure that the father of the child plays a minimal role. In the hostels, however, the father is the only person morally obliged to support the mother and child. In addition to sharing the limited bed space with the mother and newborn baby, the man has to ensure that hot water is available for bathing, that breakfast is cooked for the mother and that where the woman is unwell the nappies are washed as well. This is in stark contrast to the treatment this woman would have received as support from her in-laws. They would be loath to 'spoil' her and in some cases would compel her to engage in household duties as early as a day after delivery. There are also problems that apply to women living alone in the rural areas, who would have no help during such crucial periods of their lives. Some men enjoy this form of interaction and sharing of responsibilities, but for the majority it is a burden they could do without.[36]

The absence of extended family members in the hostel setting and the uniqueness of the setting, compared to village life, has other unexpected outcomes for some couples, especially with respect to the division of labour in the domestic sphere. The following case illustrates this point:

Mthembu has a long history of working as a chef in Cape Town between 1958 and 1981. He loves cooking and takes pride in preparing special meals for his family. In the hostel where they live, this is acceptable, but in the village where they have their 'home', the wife has to

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[33] The application of double standards in regulating extra-marital relationships has always been a bone of contention. In Pondoland in the 1930s, Hunter found that this was the commonest cause of quarrels between husbands and their wives. Many married women of that time defied their husbands and took lovers secretly. It remains contested territory. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, p. 42.

[34] See in particular, O'Brien, *Politics of Reproduction*.

[35] *ibid*, p. 54, 133.

[36] Doing 'women's work' is demeaning and only extreme necessity forces many men to engage in it. M. Peskin and A. Spiegel, 'Urban hostels in the Johannesburg area' in P. Mayer, (ed.) *Migrant Labour: Some Perspectives from Anthropology* (Rhodes University, 1976).

protect him from ridicule from his friends and neighbours by only letting him cook behind closed doors. 'He must still be seen to be accorded the respect due to him as the man of the house', says the wife laughing.

Married women also welcome the space for leisure time which their stay in the hostels affords them. The inconveniences of lack of privacy and the ever present squalor are tolerated for as long as possible, so that they can regain their strength away from the backbreaking chores of rural life.[37]

Men and single women

The position of single women in the hostels is an interesting one.[38] These women are widowed or divorced or have never married and most of them have children either in town or in rural base. They have come to Cape Town in search of a source of income to support their families. Survival is the motivating factor behind their every move. Relationships with men are determined mainly by the need for accommodation, although other considerations such as financial support and occasionally affection play a part. As one woman put it: 'People have boyfriends mainly because they need a place to stay. Some do it for the sake of being supported by these men, but they are a minority. Most people hate the system of *ukuhlalisana* (living together) but they have no choice, because of accommodation problems.'

The institution of marriage presents dilemmas for women the world over, but more espcially for those living on the edge of survival. On the one hand marriage is seen as a passport to social respectability.[39] On the other hand, some women choose to remain single in spite of social sentiment against them. A study of women in Grahamstown saw this as a way of fighting poverty.[40]

There is general agreement among both men and women that most of the lover relationships in the hostels are characterised by mutual abuse and that both partners derive whatever benefit they can whilst they can. For men the benefit is mainly that of having a 'domestic slave' to attend to their laundry, cooking and cleaning as well as a sexual partner. The women are constantly reminded that they are dispensable. 'I know the face of my wife', is a common saying of married men to their girlfriends whenever there is an argument. Single women are also disadvantaged by the stiff competition for supportive males, which limits their ability to bargain for a better deal. They know that there are countless other desparate women waiting to replace them.

There are however some ingenious unmarried women who use what opportunities for survival the hostels provide. Sisi Buli is a case in point:

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[37] Such as fetching water daily at long distances and gathering fire wood under difficult and hazardous conditions.

[38] See also the description of single women in Kampala, Obbo, *African Women*.

[39] See also the case of Bate who married a drunkard, because she felt that prostitution was more 'rotten' than drunkeness, in ibid.

[40] The Kampala women in Obbo, *African Women*, p. 89, have decided opinions about men. Some have tried marriage and had their fingers burnt, but they all agreed that although men were necessary for a healthy sex life, they were a nuisance in general. See also V. van der Vliet, 'Staying single: A strategy against Poverty', Carnegie Conference Paper, No. 116, Cape Town, 1984.

She was widowed in 1978 with four children and came to Cape Town in 1982 as a workseeker. After a short spell as a live-in domestic worker, she was fired because she did not have a proper pass. She then moved to Langa hostel where her sister was staying with her husband. She used to sleep on the floor on a sponge mattress, between the beds in her brother-in-law's room. She made a living by selling vegetables from a stand outside their hostel. She soon found a boyfriend with whom she moved to another hostel in Langa. She has a child by this man, but had to move out in 1985 when his wife came to stay with him. She moved next door where she had a relative, sleeping on the floor between beds. She has now secured another boyfriend, a successful shebeen king, and also helps him run a 'mobile shop' parked outside their window. Her teenage daughter came to join her in 1986 and she put her up in a room in the same block on a bed left to her by a retrenched man from her village. She did not seem to be perturbed by her daughter's pregnancy, which orrurred a few months later, expressing satisfaction with the turn of events. Her youngest child is thriving and is the only one of her children who has not suffered from malnutrition. Her views on the subject are very clearly expressed: 'I feel that relationships with men are a matter of convenience. One takes what comes and moves on when the time is right. There is a lot of competition amongst women for men's attentions and, once involved with one, one must ensure that one keeps their attention.'

Sisi Buli is one of many women who have elected to stay single after the end of their marriages. She tried the respectable way of earning an income, as a domestic worker (one of the few avenues open to poor African women), but the ruthlessness of the pass laws of that period put a stop to it. Her story also shows some of the networks operative in these hostels that enable a woman to gain entry into this supposedly male preserve. Relatives, acquaintenances from 'home' and friends all serve at some stage or other as useful contacts. Men are seen in this context as useful resources, thus making competition inevitable. Manipulation of sexual and reproductive capacities by both herself and her daughter is a major part of the survival kit utilised.

One of the indicators of improvement in her socio-economic status is the condition of her rural 'home', which she claims to have upgraded from a simple rondavel [41] to a hexagonal house with enough space for her needs. In addition, she is enjoying the feeling of not having to worry about where the next meal is going to come from, which used to be a problem during her married life, hence the malnutrition of all her children. She visits her 'home' in December to see her other children, who stay with her sisters during her absence.

There are, however, other poeple who have 'satisfactory' relationships, which seem to work well for all parties. They live together in relative dignity and encourage each other in fulfilling their respective responsibilities to their rural family homes. One woman involved in such a relationship went as far as to say that her boyfriend's wife is eternally grateful to her for the positive contribution she has made to their married life. She is employed as a domestic worker and although she has borne him four children, she does not make undue demands on his income.

Relationships among women

Competition is a central feature of woman's relationships in this setting. Firstly, married women see single women as potential or current objects of their husbands' attentions and consequently a cause of neglect of family responsibilities. Single

[41] Circular, one-roomed dwelling.

women resent the lack of respect which married women tend to display towards them and feel strongly about being blamed unfairly for the irresponsible behaviour of married men. There are numerous instances cited by informants of physical fights between women over these issues; in rare instances, these end in death. One such case involved a woman who arrived by bus in the early hours of the morning, having received a tip-off from another woman who had been visiting her own husband. She found her husbands girlfriend asleep in his bed. He was on night duty. She had come prepared for a showdown and was armed with a knife. In the ensuing struggle the girlfriend got hold of the knife and stabbed the married woman to death. Such cases of families that have broken down under the stress of triangular relationships are cited in condemnation of single women as destructive elements in the hostels.

Secondly, there is competition between single women for the attentions of the potential partners. Attractiveness becomes a matter of survival. Central to one's look is the colour of ones skin. Women feel, that, even if they run the risk of damaging their skin, it would be suicidal to stop using skin lightening creams. 'You are regarded as a woman who doesn't care about her appearance and you are dumped in favour of those women who are nice and pink'. When questioned on the problems of long term skin damage, the retort is': 'Let that day come when it comes, as for now I can't stop and take the risk of losing out. . . in any case it might happen when I am too old to bother about my looks.'

The issue of skin lightening creams raises two important points for analysis. Firstly, it is a product of a racist environment that devalues those without 'white' skins. Lightness of skin colour is thus equated with beauty, or alternatively with higher socio-economic status. This perception is vigorously promoted by advertising in all media. It can thus be inferred that Africans are at the bottom of the rung because of the colour of their skins. Secondly, it is a reflection of the sexual objectification of women's bodies, turning them into playthings owned by men. Women end up experiencing their bodies in ways dictated to by those monitoring and interpreting the changes over time of their body processes.[42]

There are also instances where women support one another. These relate mainly to periods of distress or illness. When someone is ill and unable to help herself, other women in the 'door' assist with nursing care during the day, whilst the responsible male is at work. There is also significant support given to mothers with newborn babies in the form of warm meals for the mother, washing of nappies and running small errands. This is by no means a susbtitute for the father's role during this period, but is seen as being complementary to it. Women also rally to the support of others during the periods of grief, sickness of relatives and assault by male partners. Regarding assault, support takes the form of alerting other men to restrain the offender. Such cases are said to have decreased significantly over the last five years, due to the heavy penalties meted out to offenders by the disciplinary system of the *izibonda*. According to residents, assault of women resulting in disturbances of the peace is punishable by fines ranging from R10 upwards , with higher fines for multiple offenders.[43]

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[42] One's self-image is thus dictated by the expectation of others, Brittan and Maynard, *Sexism* p. 219.

[43] Defiance may also lead to expulsion from the 'door' with the help of the township board authorities, Thomas, 'Conflicts and their resolution'.

There are interesting points raised by this system of discipline and justice. Firstly, it appears that a man is free to assault his female partner as long as he does not disturb the peace. Some men take their partners to the open veld where they assault them without running foul of the disciplinary code; only the uninitiated women fall prey to this. A woman is tipped off by others to refuse to go out after arguments and, if forced to threaten to scream. Secondly, it shows how women have learned how to exploit an instrument of male domination for their own protection. Thirdly, in the cases of assault, women close ranks and temporarily forget their competitive relationships to ensure protection of the victim.

We need to address the apparent inability of women to organise effectively as a group and fight for a better deal. This question is particularly pertinent in view of the considerable time they spend together while most men are at work. Several factors play a part in this. Firstly, one has to recognise the reality of the lines that divide women in this setting, namely age, marital status, length of stay in Cape Town and degree of economic dependence on men. These lines of division are stronger than the ties that bind them by virtue of their common oppresssion.[44] Secondly, there is the fear of taking risks, which is a feature of most exploitative and oppressive systems.[45] This fear also undermines the capacity to establish relationships of trust between the oppressed individuals, which are a prerequisite for defining common purposes. The definition of common purpose is further complicated by the atomisation of women in their individual relationships with men. These are very personal and each man exploits and subordinates in a unique way within the parameters of individual relationships. Lastly, the totality of oppression also takes its toll, by conditioning the oppressed actually to believe that their best interest is served by acquiescing in the demands of the oppressor. The result is that, in general, when women everywhere do organise, they often do so in ways that reinforce their nurturing roles and not in those that promote their interests as people in their own right.[46]

Interaction among men

It is also important for us to examine how males interact in groups and as individuals. As in the 1960s, kinship ties are maintained and utilised as a source of support for newly arrived workseekers in the form of accommodation, food and placement in jobs. People from the same home village also help and support one another, especially at times of death, sickness and important ceremonies such as circumcision and marriage.[47]

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[44] In fact they delineate their differential capacity to manipulate patriarchy for their own ends, Johnnetta Cole, *All American Women, Lines that divide, ties that bind* (New York, 1986).

[45] Fear is a determinant and an outcome of unequal power relations. See, for example, S. Biko. 'Fear — An Important Determinant in South African Politics' in A. Stubbs (ed.), *Steve Biko: I write what I like* (Penguin, 1987).

[46] Brittan and Maynard, Sexism, p. 218.

[47] A generation ago, circumcision was the key to manhood with all its right and privileges. The *amakhwenkwe* (the initiated) were constantly reminded of their inferior status as an incentive to work harder and save for this important event during their next visit home. M. Wilson and A. Mafeje, *Langa. A study of study of Social Group in an African Township* (Cape Town, 1963), p. 47.

Age is an important criterion of stratification. The old are revered and placed in positions of authority in both the *isibonda* system and the Hostel Dwellers' Association. They are consulted in all important matters where their wisdom is needed. They also help to remind young men of their family responsibilities, such as regular remittances, visits home and the virtues of saving. This used to be taken to the extent that the older men from a village would keep all the wages of the younger men, giving them only what they required for bare essentials. Reasonable savings were thus effected from relatively meagre wages. In the early 1960s, this later function was said to be diminishing because of resistance by the younger generations. [48]

These mechanisms of authority go a long way towards minimising unpleasantness in this difficult environment. There is some respect for people and their property. There are few reported cases of women being molested by other men while their own partners are at work. This is remarkable given the lack of privacy and the frequent occurrence of women sharing rooms with relative strangers. One does, however, get the impression that some of the men do not trust their room mates and their wives, and prefer to send them home when they are on night duty. 'It is easier for everybody. I don't want to end up reading danger signs in everything my wife does or says to my room mate. I can never know what happens when I am away.'

The pattern of interaction outlined is a recipe for conservatism. The older men have a vested interest in the perpetulation of this sytem that gives them so much power. Nor is there any evidence of a concerted attempt by younger men to challenge the system. Several reasons may be advanced for this. It is easier to stick to the known than experiment with the unknown, and the present system seems to work well for all the men. There is no reason why they should change it. Reverence for age is part of the world view of most people in this setting and is reinforced throughout their socialisation with the final seal being placed during circumcision. Circumcision also represents the final severance of the umbilical cord: one gets reborn into the world of men, where men are the only actors. [49]

There is a strong argument by many people for maintaining circumcision. They feel that it is central to 'the Xhosa tradition'. Most of the women interviewd were quite categorical about the unacceptability of uncircumcised men as partners. They feel that such men would have difficulty in fitting in the world of custom and ritual. [50]

The presence of women in the hostels seems to create problems for some men, who had got 'used' to living as 'men alone'. The redefinition of relationships between men necessitated by this 'invasion' has led to a variety of responses. For example, one Flat in Langa has a policy of excluding women completely from the hostel, except as day time visitors. This also includes the lawful wives of the men living in this hostel. The rationale behind this exclusion was explained to us by the

[48] *ibid*. p. 143.

[49] O'Brien views this as a ritualisation of the birth of man's 'second nature' and an effort to impose their will and control over the natural reproductive process. The exclusion of women, the isolation for a variable length of time and the inevitable physical pain are all part of the ritual of a second birth, O'Brien, *Politics of Reproduction*, p. 146.

[50] Mayer also notes that some men viewed this as a form of resistance against foreign cultural domination. It was the one ceremony that distinguished the 'indigenous from the foreign. Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*.

most senior resident as being a reflection of their commitment to a 'clean Christian life' and their desire to maintain a spirit of 'brotherhood'. Allowing women to sleep over in the hostels would threaten this moral purity, create points of conflict between the men and set a bad example for younger residents. All residents of this hostel are said to be 'born again Christians' and thus subscribe to this approach.

The contradiction between this 'purity' approach and the Christian principle of keeping married couples together could not be satisfactorily explained away; instead, the informant fell back on the fact that it was illegal for men and women to live together in the hostels anyway, and he did not want to break the law. His own wife lives in a hostel nearby, and visits him on the above terms. They visit relatives in the township whenever they want to spend a night together. This is an extreme demonstration of 'selective conservatism'.[51] This selectivity is used to reinforce the worst elements of African 'traditionalism' with an appeal to Christian values of 'purity'.

The position of the HDA is an interesting one in that it attempts to fulfil two major roles with potential areas of conflict. Firstly it sees itself as a trade union of workers, taking up issues outside the factory floor. This role necessitates recruitment of as many of the workers as possible to legitimate the HDA's claim to representativeness. Recruitment entails trying to convince people to see the organisation as operating in their best interest. To tamper with the power of the *izibonda* is risky, because of its centrality to people with otherwise few opportunities to exercise power. The HDA has thus opted for co-option of these structures, rather than run the risk of antagonism.

This co-option has ensured both male dominance in the membership and an exclusively male executive of the HDA. When this issue was raised on one of the leadership training workshops, the retort was: 'We are still cooking them [the hostel women], they are not yet ready for leadership roles.' Only one woman had the courage to oppose this view publicly, by pointing to the crucial role women's committees were playing in the health and child care projects of the organisation. These women's committees are subordinate to the area committees run by men. This situation is all the more unsatisfactory for the women, because the voluntary contributions of their labour in project work is not matched by participation in decision making processes.

As part of the 'progressiveness movement', and as a COSATU[52] affiliate, the HDA assumes the role of a change agent. Fighting for people's rights is part of its brief. It therefore has to profess, at least, to being non-sexist, non-racist and democratic. It is thus finding itself in an invidious position of being able to translate rhetoric into reality.[53]

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[51] Hunter explained this phenomenon as follows: 'The selection of elements, whether material objects, techniques, beliefs or rituals, from the intruding culture, depends upon the degree to which they enhance previous methods, and serve ends fully congruous with the old order, *Reaction to Conquest*, p. 548.

[52] Congress to South African Trade Unions.

[53] This tension is not unique to the HDA, but is evident in most organisations for changes the world over — see, for example, M. Randall, *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (New York, 1963), L. Sargent, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (London, 1981); Walker traces similar tensions throughout the history of South African resistance politics, *Women and resistance in South Africa*, (London, 1982).

It is important also to realise that there are women who ultimately transcend the trappings of these power relations. Nomsa is in a way an exceptional woman, embodying all the elements of resilience, but retaining an attractive vulnerability:

Her first arrival in Cape Town was in 1966, having cried and screamed herself hoarse on board a car driven by her abductors all the way from the Transkei village where she was a nineteen year old school pupil. She was the victim of a forced marriage to a man who was living in one of the hostels. Despite her protests, the marriage was formalised by payment of 'forgiveness money' and 'lobola' to her parents. She then lived with her husband alternating between a shack in Guguletu and her husband's bed in the hostel. She moved through the stages of being oscillating wife from 1967 to 1975, and at her insistence the family joined other people who established Cross Roads Squatter Camp in 1975. She weathered the storms of patriarchical politics of this squatter camp[54] as a member of the women's committee. She finally divorced her husband because of irreconcilable differences, and faced the struggle to support their four children. She suffered a nervous breakdwon in the process, but managed to recover with the help of friends and relatives. She then worked for a while as a health worker in Cross Roads, in a community development agency. In 1984, she moved into a house in New Cross Roads, which is her present home. She completed the full circle of emancipation by taking up a job with the HDA in 1986, as a health worker with special responsibility for organising women for full participation. She had a checkered career there, which ended in her resignation towards the end of 1987 because of fundamental differences with the leadership over their attitude to the role of women. She is now employed as a field worker for a child care resource unit.

Conclusion

The debate about the primacy of race and class over gender in resistance politics rages on. In South Africa it is a highly emotive issue. Accusations of introducing divisive issues into an already complicated political environment are very appealing to both men and women engaged at different levels in the struggle for a better future.[55]

The interaction of men and women in this 'man's world' is an illustration of the most vicious kind of articulation of race, class and gender. But it is more than just that. It's also a reflection of the impact of custom and traditional practices on individuals operating on the edge of survival. I wish to argue that the forces of 'tradition', although subjected to change over time, have the capacity to develop a momentum of their own, which in turn becomes an important and fourth factor in shaping society.

Our analysis has to extend to this fourth factor, which is both a product of a particular form of racial, class and gender differentiation and a determinant of the form this differentiation takes in the present and future. The different forms of

[54] See Josette Cole, *Crossroads*.

[55] On the one hand, black men are powerless and thus incapable of oppressing and exploiting their women, argues *Umtapo Focus*, a newsletter published by the Information and Research Unit of Umtapo Centre, (November, 1987), p. 12. On the other hand, others argue for a more integrated struggle that addresses all forms of unequal power relations as the only effective way of releasing all the creative energy needed in both fighting for, and laying the foundations of, an egalitarian future. R. Bertelsmann, 'International feminism and the women's movement in South Africa,' *South African Outlook*, 117, 139, (1987), pp. 62-6.

patriarchy in pre-industrial Afrikaner and African societies have been compared.[56] Afrikaners legitimated their system by relying on Christian values of man as the head of the house, whereas Africans relied on kinship and 'purity' ideologies to maintain the subordination of women. The reality of South Africa today is that African patriarchs have both Christianity and 'tradition' available to them to legitimate the perpetuation of the existing patriarchical system.

The tendency for people to exploit 'tradition' for particular purposes is a well known phenomenon and it is often a successful strategy. Its success rests mainly on an appeal to the glory of the past, which for people living under dehumanising conditions remains the only way of affirming their humanity and resisting further dehumanisation. 'Tradition' then becomes a rallying point for resistance to exploitative foreign powers.[57]

This paper has attempted to show that women in the hostels are not hopeless victims of a vicious system that they can do very little about; on the contrary, their ingenuity and survival strategies are proof of their strengths. It is however, important to move away from the romanticism that tends to dominate literature on this subject, which paints women as heroines, without due regard of the cost of these struggles to them as individuals and as a group. Staying single is at one level an effective strategy, but at another it is not. The tentacles of patriarchy stretch far and wide and one can only escape certain aspects of them. Feminists have yet to find a way of communicating with individual women and men in a way that will not only make sense to them, but will address the threat posed by fundamental change in the power relations between men and women.

Personal relations need to be renegotiated . This calls for further integration of the personal with the political and a recognition of the fact that the pscyhological effects of domination are only collective, but also intensely personal. The psychological sphere is a highly politicised one, especially in an oppressive society like South Africa.

[56] B. Bozzoli, 'Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies', *Journals of Southern African Studies*, 9, 2 (1983) pp. 149-55.
[57] See Keesing's comments on the Indians of North America, R.M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology* (2nd ed., New York, 1981), p. 406; see also the literature of the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s, such as Steve Biko's work, in Stubbs, *Steve Biko*.